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FOOD SAFETY & INSPECTION SERVICE

People, the Public Health, & Consumer Protection

The United States Department of Agriculture

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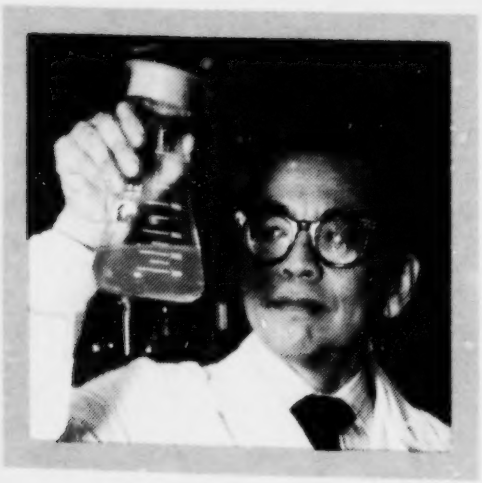
"If I do a good job, it results in a product that's good for the consumer. I've got a family out there eating this product. I'm a consumer, too."

—An FSIS food inspector

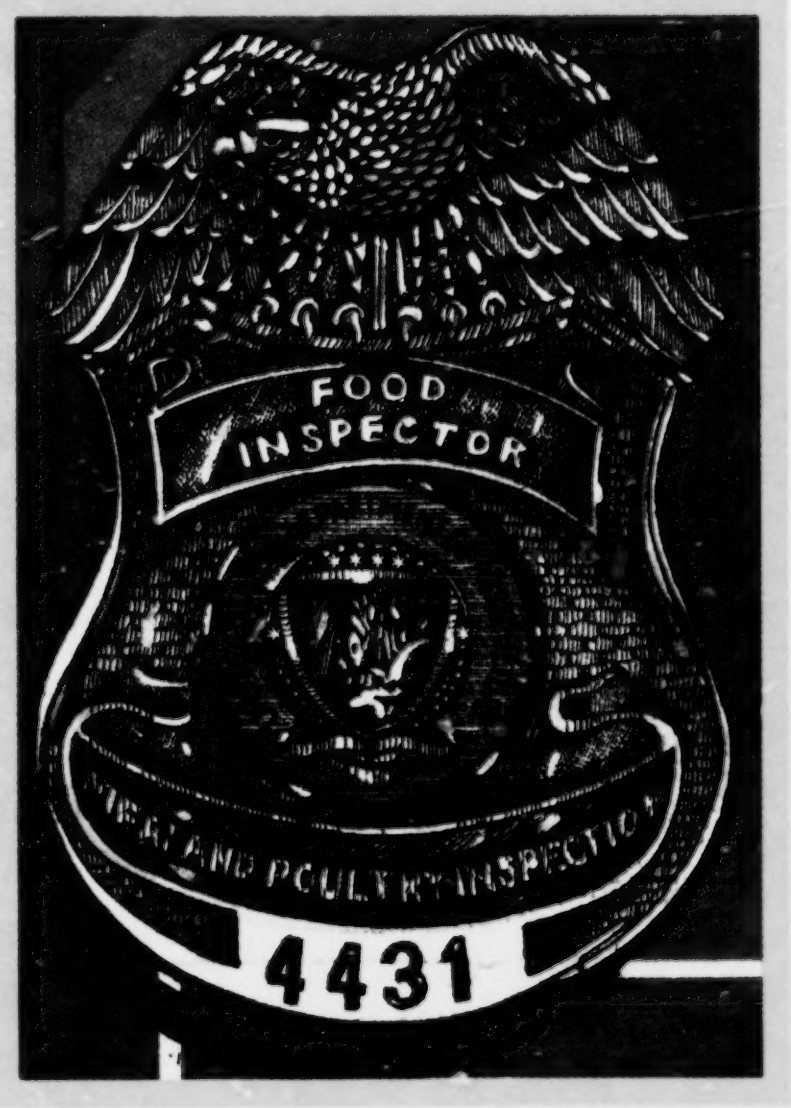
The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is a public health and consumer protection agency. The people of FSIS—its more than 9,000 employees—use the best and latest science to ensure that the U.S. meat and poultry supply is safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled.

One of the first consumer protection laws led to Federal meat inspection in 1906. At that time, the major public health concerns were animal disease and filth. Scientific tools were limited, and inspection depended on keen eyes.

After more than 80 years—and light years' worth of scientific advances—FSIS inspectors still carry on this work. However, under modern production and inspection concepts, food inspectors, food scientists, veterinarians, and others are dedicated to preventing problems before they occur, rather than catching unsafe food at the end of the line. For instance, animals are healthier than in years past. Today, U.S. meat and poultry products are among the most intensively inspected foods in the world. In fact, they must be federally inspected before they can be shipped across State lines or overseas.



Each year, FSIS inspectors examine about 120 million head of livestock; almost 6 billion chickens, turkeys, and other poultry; and more than 160 billion pounds of processed products such as ham, chicken potpies, and beef jerky. For each man, woman, and child in the United States, this translates into 150 pounds of red meat; 20 chickens, turkeys or other poultry; and 610 pounds of processed products. Yet the program costs only about $1.60 per person per year.



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Everyone Shares Responsibility for Safe Food

Everyone has a role in ensuring a safe food supply. Producers have the first-line responsibility for bringing to market healthy animals that are free of illegal drug or pesticide residues.

The food industry is responsible for providing safe food—and responsible companies know that safe food is good business. While companies race to provide consumers with convenient, timesaving, nutritious, and reasonably priced food, they also must deliver safe food.

The people in the Food Safety and Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, regulate the meat and poultry industry to make sure that companies do their jobs correctly to provide the safest food possible. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has authority over other foods. FDA also determines allowable levels of animal

drug residues in food, including meat and poultry. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does the same for pesticides.

Those who store and transport meat and poultry products must ensure that they are kept clean and, if necessary, refrigerated. Grocery stores and other food retailers must store and display food so that it remains safe and wholesome.

Finally, food handlers—whether in homes, restaurants, or institutions—are responsible for meat and poultry after the products leave the store.

The mission of FSIS employees is to protect public health and ensure that meat and poultry are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled.

The Marks of Inspection

The official USDA mark of inspection assures consumers that the product has been manufactured under clean and safe conditions. There are three different marks—one for meat carcasses; one for processed meat products; and one for fresh, frozen or processed poultry. The mark of inspection for meat carcasses is likely to show only on large cuts of meat because carcasses are often shipped to grocery stores and then cut into steaks and chops.

The Science Behind Inspection

Modern meat and poultry inspection is based on science. FSIS believes this is the best basis on which to make public health decisions.

Safe food starts with healthy animals. Veterinarians, microbiologists, chemists, and other specialists use science to determine what to look for in food animals, both before slaughter and throughout slaughter and processing.

At the plants, animals are inspected before slaughter to ensure that they are healthy. After slaughter, inspectors examine each carcass and the internal organs for disease or contamination. They also look for other abnormalities, such as lesions made by injections, that indicate recent treatment with drugs. If an inspector finds an abnormality, a veterinarian then examines the carcass and determines whether it can be used for food.

The inspector's basic mission is consumer protection.

The meat and poultry in processed products are actually inspected twice—at slaughter and during processing. Meat and poultry processors make more than a thousand different items, including hams, hotdogs, sausages, frozen dinners, and soup.

FSIS sets specific regulations governing how meat and poultry can be slaughtered and processed. The public has an opportunity to comment when regulations are being developed. Slaughtering and processing plants vary greatly, but the inspector's basic mission—consumer protection—never changes. Each inspector has specific guidelines

for checking each type of operation. For example, inspectors ensure that:

- Before operations begin, the plant and all equipment are sanitary—including walls, floors, freezers and refrigerators, conveyor belts, knives, employee clothing, restrooms, and lockers.

- All areas, including storage areas, are free of rodents and pests.

- Products, including nonmeat ingredients, are stored at proper temperatures and in sanitary containers.

- Raw ingredients of different species—such as pork, poultry, and beef—are well marked and kept separate.

For each product, inspectors have specific guidelines, increasingly based on science.

- Products contain only USDA-approved ingredients and are processed safely.

- No grease, metal fragments, or other foreign material are on any food products.

- Cooking units, refrigerators, and freezers are operating at correct temperatures.

- Products reach the internal temperature required to destroy bacteria during cooking.

- Only approved packaging materials are used.

- The label is accurate, including any special claims that are made by the company, and it is not misleading.

- Weights stated on the labels are correct.

"Different products present different risks, and require different controls. For instance, the process—and the risks—for making dry sausage are very different from those for making canned chicken stew."

—An FSIS food technologist in a processing plant

FSIS inspectors have the authority to take necessary action to ensure consumer protection, and can shut down an entire operation until a problem is corrected. For instance, if grease from machinery drips onto meat on a conveyor belt, the inspector can shut down that line until the plant management stops the dripping and destroys any contaminated product.

Inspectors in both slaughtering and processing plants also take samples for inplant and labora-

tory testing to guard against chemical or microbiological contamination. They look for "economic adulteration," in which a less expensive product may be substituted for the one specified on the label, such as chicken in a hot dog labeled "all beef."

New Technology To Protect Consumers

Agency scientists are continually developing or adopting new technologies to protect consumers from unseen hazards. For instance, they have developed an inplant test to tell immediately if calves carry illegal levels of antibiotics or sulfa drugs. Agency scientists have also developed new tests to determine if poultry or various species of meat are in a processed product where they are not supposed to be. Scientists and inspectors use these tests to identify fraudulent products and protect consumers who may be allergic to certain animal products.

In a typical year, FSIS performs more than 2 million analyses of meat and poultry. These include tests for bacteria such as salmonella and listeria, for animal drug residues, for diseases and for economic adulteration.

Although consumers express concern about chemical contamination, most experts believe microbial contamination poses a greater hazard to human health than pesticide or animal drug residues.

"Many residues are preventable. We work with producers and packers to ensure that animals do not have violative residues at slaughter. That is one way in which we work to protect consumers."

—An FSIS veterinarian

The Federal Government sets very conservative limits on allowable residues in food. These limits usually give a margin of safety that is at least 100 times stricter than the level that would cause any observable effects.

Through enforcement and education, FSIS scientists and others have made great strides in influencing producers and the industry to prevent residues. Now, only about 3 out of each 1,000 samples monitored in the national residue program show illegal residue levels. Most violations only slightly exceed the legal limit.

Labels Help Consumers Make Choices

The label is the link between the manufacturer and the consumer, allowing people to choose products that suit their needs or preferences.

Inspectors have broad authority to ensure that products are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled.

Consumers get advice about food handling to prevent foodborne illness, from the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

FSIS has unique food labeling authority—any label that appears on federally inspected meat or poultry must be approved before it can be used on the product. In most cases, label reviewers with training in food science or inspection review the labels in the Washington, D.C., headquarters. At times, companies must make changes before the label is approved. The label must contain certain information, including an official USDA mark of inspection and any handling instructions if the product is perishable. Above all, the label must be accurate.

USDA sets standards for the content of meat and poultry in certain products, and limits the amount of fat, moisture, and other ingredients that may be added to products. For instance, a product labeled "western omelet" must contain at least 18 percent ham and include onions and green or red bell peppers.

> ***"Accurate and informative labels help consumers choose products that meet their needs."***
>
> ***—An FSIS nutritionist***

Labels cannot be misleading. For example, the picture on the label must be honest. If it shows three slices of beef in a frozen dinner, there must be at least three slices.

Many companies have chosen to add nutrition information to their labels. FSIS is committed to providing consumers with the nutrition information that they find most useful. However, the Agency will not approve labels that could confuse or mislead consumers into believing there are "good foods" and "bad foods." Each food choice should be part of a total balanced diet.

Enforcement—After Products Leave the Plant

FSIS employees from many disciplines—from engineering to computer science to food technology—work to prevent problems before they occur. However, the Agency has authority to carry out enforcement actions, both at plants and in the marketplace.

For serious offenses, FSIS inspectors or other officials can withdraw inspection from a plant, which virtually closes it down because federally

"As compliance officers, we're the second line of defense for consumers. We go where inspectors can't—to warehouses, trucking companies, and retail stores."

—An FSIS compliance officer

inspected plants may not operate without inspection. In the most serious cases, U.S. courts ultimately determine the culpability of companies accused of breaking the meat and poultry inspection laws. Fines as high as $2 million—and prison sentences—have been imposed.

Agency compliance officers spot-check samples of meat and poultry after products leave the plant—in warehouses, distribution and transportation facilities, and retail stores.

Rarely does an unsafe product reach consumers. In these instances, FSIS works with companies to quickly recall the products. The Agency alerts the public and the distributors so that people will not eat the products and can return them to the point of purchase.

Imports Receive Equal Inspection

FSIS also ensures the wholesomeness of imported meat and poultry products. Imports are accepted only from countries that inspect their slaughter and processing plants in ways that are equal to the inspection performed in U.S. plants. The Agency

reviews foreign inspection systems to ensure they are equal to the U.S. system in all ways, as the law requires.

FSIS also reinspects imported meat and poultry products on a sample basis as they enter the United States. Data from import reinspection verifies the effectiveness of foreign inspection systems.

Food Safety Education and Public Involvement

FSIS's responsibilities as a public health agency go beyond inspection. FSIS employees also educate the public about food safety and invite their comments on Agency programs and proposals.

People have the right to safe, wholesome, and nutritious food that is accurately labeled. Many consumers also want to know how their food is produced and what risks, if any, are involved. People want this information so they can make informed choices about their food.

That is why FSIS invites the public, interest groups, industry, and the media to briefings and hearings on Agency regulations, policies, and programs. The Agency's Information and Legislative Affairs staff also prepares factsheets and

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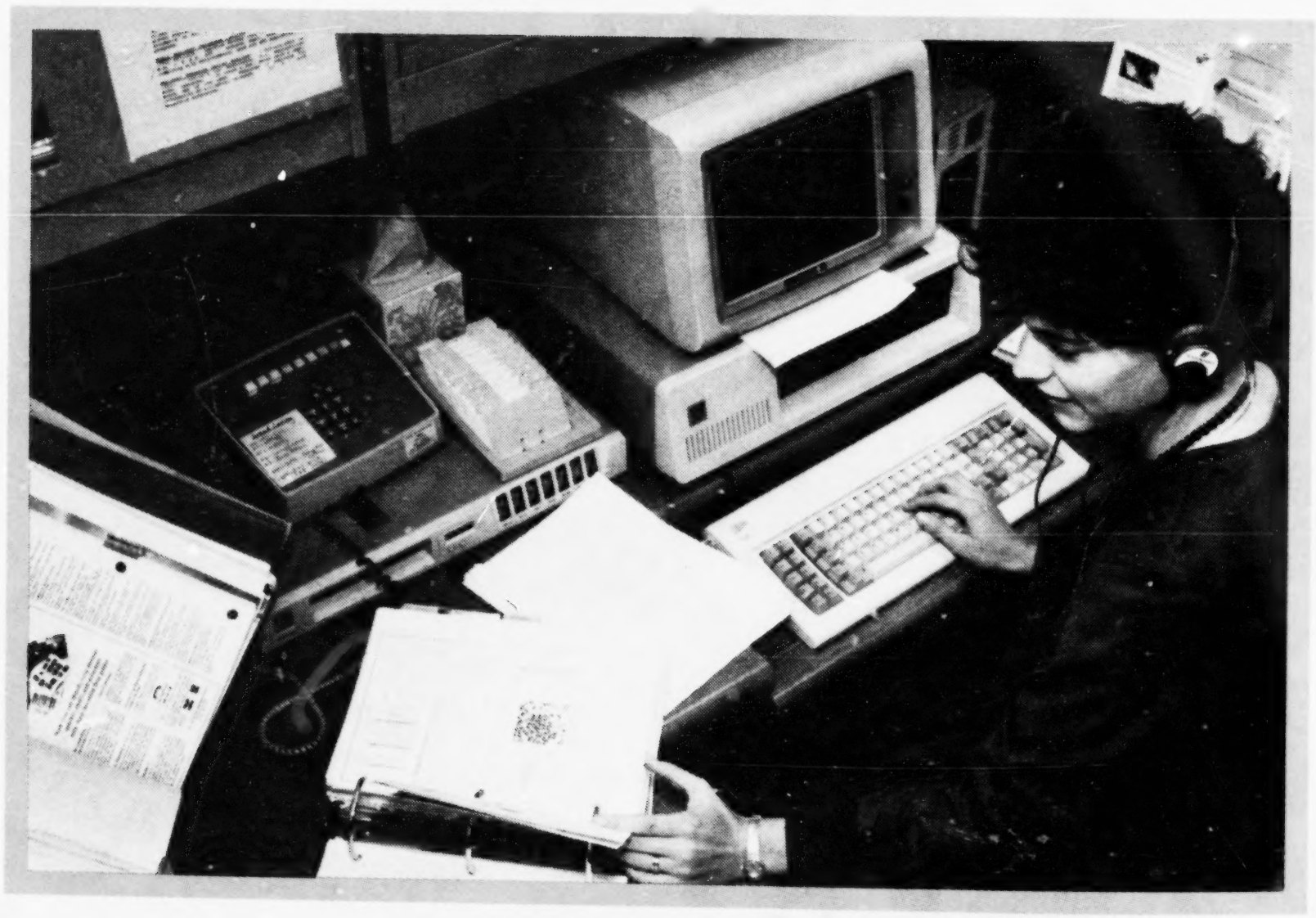
other information on safe animal production, industry requirements, foodborne illness, safe food handling by consumers, and other FSIS programs.

A major part of the Agency's educational effort is the toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline. Tens of thousands of people call the Hotline each year for advice on how to handle meat and poultry and ensure that food is safe. To get answers, callers may dial 1-800-435-4555, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Eastern Time. At other times, callers will hear recorded food safety messages. Washington, D.C. area residents may call (202) 447-3333.

While FSIS has helped educate the public about food safety for almost two decades, its people want to do even more. For instance, they are reaching new audiences, such as consumers who face special risks from foodborne illness and people whose native language is not English. Agency



employees also explain the role of science and technology in producing and ensuring safe food.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service is a public health agency. It is a meat and poultry inspection program based on the latest and best science. And, most of all, it is more than 9,000 dedicated employees working to ensure that the meat and poultry supply is safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled.

Everyone has a role in food safety—farmers and animal producers, industry, government, and consumers.

Anyone wishing to find out more about the Food Safety and Inspection Service, or make suggestions or comment upon the work its people do, can write to the Director of Information and Legislative Affairs, FSIS, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Room 327-E, 14th and Independence Ave., Washington, D.C. 20250.

Food Safety and Inspection Service
FSIS-39
September 1990

United States Department of Agriculture